When I Feel the Snake Bite Enter My Veins

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When I Feel the Snake Bite Enter My Veins

by averycutesalamander

Summary

You would love nothing more to rip out your husband's teeth for all he's done to you – but it seems you're sorely lacking the means.

How fortunate that Boothill has such a strong grip.

~

A moment passes before you smile, wide and broad and earnest; it feels unfamiliar on your face. Then, you hold out your hand for him to shake, grinning ear-to-ear. “It's *wonderful* to finally meet you, Boothill.”

He blinks at you for a moment, then laughs, bright and loud. “Oh, you're a funny one, huh?” Without fuss, he clasps your hand in his, giving it a firm shake; the cool metal of his palm is strangely pleasant against your skin. “The pleasure’s all mine, miss. Heard you've got a pest problem?”

“Oh, more than just a problem,” you say, your smile sharpening into something dangerous. “It's a damn infestation.”

A lethal glint shines in his eyes. “Well, consider me your exterminator.”

Notes

To make sure no one misses it:

WARNINGS for threatening and possessive behavior, mentions of nonconsentual sex (extremely vague, no details), nonconsentual body modification (also vague; nothing extreme), and physical abuse (once onto reader, but it isn't the typical kind of violence; nobody lays hands on her), none of which are on Boothill's part. There are also depictions of violence and gore (not done to the reader.) I chose not to tag for noncon because it felt too brief to warrant it, so consider yourself warned now. If you want more detailed descriptions before deciding to read, feel free to check the end notes! Stay safe everyone <3

See the end of the work for more notes

You hate – no, *despise* – no, ***abhor*** your husband. He is a despicable, disgusting, wicked, greedy, heartless man, and were it not for this wretched fucking collar, you would have killed him years ago, a thousand times over.

You first met him when you were young and stupid and bafflingly naive, caught up in your passion as a singer. You'd been performing for years, bouncing between miserably low-paying gigs at bars and private events and all sorts of sketchy places; you were certain you'd hit the *jackpot* when you managed to call in a favor from a friend of a friend and secured a *single* night at a sizable casino – but with pay like that, a single night would be all you'd need to cover your expenses for half a year if you stayed frugal. Not just that, but you could meet people there – people with power, people with an eye for finer things, people that would like your talent enough that they'd pay you something *livable*.

And indeed, you got just that.

Words couldn't express how shocked you were when you were approached by Silas Morghani – a businessman, by the look of him, with dark hair and darker eyes. You didn't miss the IPC guards that tailed him, either – but the allure of his undeniable status momentarily blinded you.

(You should've known better.)

He bought you some obscenely expensive yet absolutely *revolting* wine, then bragged that he was near the top of the food chain at the Marketing Development Department, acting lordly and boastful, as if it were something to be *proud* of – as if the name didn't make your skin crawl with the childhood memories of your mother bluntly discussing the slaughter of billions over dinner. ("Trimming the fat," she always said, chewing on her steak like it wasn't once a living creature. "It's ludicrous to call it anything more.")

(You'll never forget the moment you realized what your mother's job *really* was. You were doing research for a school paper, sifting through the dusty files in your late father's office in hopes of getting a leg up; you'd just broken open an exceptionally stubborn locked drawer when you stumbled across an obscure newsletter from a long-defunct station that you don't recognize. *IPC Condemns Two Dozen Planets to Slavery: Where Will the Cruelty End?* Its only labeled author was anonymous.)

(Cluelessly, you'd skimmed the article, practically burning with curiosity; why would your father have this tucked away in a locked drawer? And then you saw it: *"One interviewee answered, 'We're only trimming the fat.' She added later that 'the citizens are only being relocated, not enslaved. It's ludicrous to call it anything more.'")*

(And for the first time, you wondered if your father really had thrown himself off the rooftop after being fired from his job at the newspaper, like mother said he had.)

But you were desperate. You'd been in the rat race for *years* at that point, struggling for scraps, being taken advantage of by shrewd business owners that could somehow *smell* the desperation on you. You were fucking *tired* of networking, tired of being fleeced, tired of *all*

of it. You grew up in a lion's den of deceit and half-truths, and you managed to slip away from all of the teeth and claws; this couldn't be any different, surely? You just needed to stay alert.

So when he offered to let you do a show at his lounge, situated at the top of a skyscraper overlooking the city, you snatched up the opportunity like a mangy dog being offered shelter from a storm.

(Little did you know that you would be chained and collared and starved – not merely thrown into the lion's den, but skinned and filleted as well. "For your own good," he'd coo, as if he didn't have the knife sitting bloody in his palm.)

After Silas hired you to perform full-time at his lounge, the jaws of the trap fully closed around you. He rooted himself into your life with frightening ease, no matter how subtly you tried to dodge his invitations to dinner or tried to end conversations so you could go home for the night. You learned very quickly that you couldn't refuse him – that *no one* could refuse him and get away with it; you've seen the corpses to prove it.

When he asked you to stay a bit longer to chat after business hours, he wasn't asking. When he asked you to do an extra show after-hours for his *work friends,* he wasn't asking. When he asked you if you wanted to move into the penthouse on the floor above the lounge, he wasn't asking. When he pinned you against your vanity and looked down at you with those horrible, soulless eyes and asked to kiss you, he wasn't asking. When he pressed you up against your door and asked if you wanted him to fuck you, he wasn't asking.

When he gifted you a heavy, diamond-encrusted necklace that sat like a choker and asked if he could put it on you, he wasn't asking. "The color matches perfectly with everything," he said, his smile just a bit too wide. "So you won't have to change it for different outfits. Quite convenient, yes?"

When he climbed up onto your stage after the biggest performance you'd ever held, he didn't kneel for you. He cupped your face under the spotlight, subtly pressing his pinkies into the tender skin beneath your jaw with just a bit too much force to be innocent, and when he asked you to marry him in front of that fully packed audience of IPC coworkers–

He wasn't *asking.*

—

You first tried to kill him only two months after your wedding.

You'd been essentially forced into taking sleeping pills because, *shockingly,* you didn't have the most restful sleep in the same bed as the man who held a half-metaphorical gun to your head. He ran his thumb beneath your tired, exhausted eyes, his brows furrowed like his prized bird had fallen ill.

"We should make sure you get some rest, pet." (He always calls you *pet*, like it's *cute.* Never in your life have you been so nauseated by a single word.) "Can't have you getting sloppy during performances, right?"

"Of course, sweetie," you said, giving him the same practiced smile you'd mastered ever since meeting him.

You tested the pills – experimented to see if you could taste the medication in a drink. Too bitter, you decided – so you fought through the drug to stay awake and told him that you'd have to try another. "It made me so nauseous, and it didn't even make me sleep," you said faintly, furrowing your brows as if you were ashamed to admit it.

The next wouldn't quite dissolve in water or alcohol – too gritty.

The next had an off taste as well – too metallic.

The next was perfect. Utterly tasteless – absolutely no change to texture.

So you slipped it into the gin you served him one night and settled into your recliner to wait, your stomach churning with unease as you nonchalantly flipped open your book. You watched in your peripheral as he took a sip, your palms clammy against the paper. No reaction – although there was a faint, nearly indistinguishable *pop,* like a car engine had sputtered in the streets hundreds of stories below.

Silas hummed in apparent interest, like he'd noticed something peculiar about a painting on the wall.

Then – a blinding flash of searing, white-hot pain, like you were being struck by lightning. The air was punched straight from your lungs, strangled from your throat. When you came to, you were dry heaving over the carpet, your neck tingling with some unnameable, boundless pain between burning and stabbing.

That stupid, ugly, *piece-of-shit necklace.*

You watched with a detached sense of horror as a pair of dress shoes stepped into your peripheral, a hand coming down beneath your chin to yank your head up. He reached up and pressed his fingers into his mouth, gripping something and *pulling.*

And there, in his palm: a false, hollow tooth with a tiny hole burst from one side. Through your blurry eyes, you could see the remnants of some kind of powder where his fingers held it.

He smiled in the same way he always has – cold and unfeeling. "It's filled with a reactive agent," he said, so utterly unmoved that it sent a chill up your spine. "It pops when exposed to blacklisted chemicals. Quite convenient, yes?"

When he leaned in, you held your breath instinctively. You could feel your heart racing in your chest, fear running cold in your veins. (Would it be the first time he hit you? Would he finally lose his patience and reveal the undeniable reality that he's a *monster?)*

Instead, he murmured, "If you try that again, pet, I fear I'll have to have your tongue cut out. And what is a songbird without her tongue?"

You always know when he's expecting an answer. With a dry rasp, you answered, "Worthless."

His smile was like a rabid wolf baring its teeth. "That's right, doll. Now, let's get your medicine, shall we? It's getting terribly late."

He wasn't asking.

—

You learned very quickly after that. If you're going to escape the gilded cage he's locked you in, you'll need to be much, *much* subtler.

(As a child, you asked your father how he came to know so many secrets. “That's what *true* journalism is about,” he once told you, and he was skilled in the art of knowing things that people of his ilk never should.)

("It's simple, poppet," he said, grinning down at you with a smile brighter than the sun. "You've gotta be a mouse.")

(You had blinked cluelessly at him. "Mice aren't very strong, papa.")

(He laughed. "Depends on how you look at it. Mice are fast, and quiet, and smart, and resourceful. They know when to freeze when a hawk passes over them." He ruffled your hair, turning back to his work. "That's how you learn the things I do, *and* how you get as good at poker as me.")

(There was one hawk he clearly couldn't hide from, though. If you want to escape the talons of your hunter, you'll need to be faster, quieter, smarter, and even more resourceful.)

So, you learn to be a mouse – and a stubborn one, at that.

You endure the degradation of every single right and privilege being ripped away from you, then drip-fed back as if it's a *kindness* and not the *bare minimum.* You don't get to choose what you wear, what color your hair is, when you sleep, when you wake. You don’t get to choose what or *when* you eat without *begging for it*, because the kitchen lies beyond a set of locked doors that only the servants can enter. You don't get to choose what songs you perform, nor when you perform them, and you *certainly* don't get to choose who your audience is. You don't get to choose what books you have access to, nor what TV channels you watch. The bastard doesn't even grant you access to *emails,* let alone anything more modern.

Once, you go to sleep and wake up in a hospital room with no memory of how you got there. Two stitched incisions lay below your navel. Neither the nurse nor the doctor nor Silas will tell you what they even *did.*

It grates on you. No, it does far more than that; it *torments* you. Every instinct in your body is urging you to bite his fucking throat out while he sleeps, to hurl yourself out one of the windows and pray you grow wings before you hit the ground, to wrench a gun from one of those horrible, soulless guards and paint the bleak white walls with red.

You endure it. You endure it all, because you will not let this *monster* ruin you.

You spend your abundant, empty time testing his limits – seeing what he'll allow before he yanks at your leash again, seeing how far his possessiveness goes. You prod carefully at his security, trying to pinpoint the locations of all of the cameras you *know* must be scattered around the penthouse. You take all of the little pieces and tuck them into the depths of your mind for safekeeping, memorizing the schedule of the most lenient and laziest guards, keeping track of which maids are most gullible and agreeable. You're very careful not to tempt Silas's wrath again; you fear it'll get him in the habit of using that fucking shock collar, and you simultaneously worry that it might destroy your voice.

(After all, what use does a despicable, vile man like him have for a songbird that can't sing? He's already cut off your wings; best not to test if he'll do the same to your head.)

You let him think he's broken you. You let him think he's won, though you're careful to make the effect seem gradual, as if the hope is draining out of you like blood from a severed artery. You make a grand show of it all – and one day, nearly a year after you were locked in this gilded cage, you let it all out in the first sobbing meltdown you've had this whole time. He holds you in those horrible arms as if he isn't your tormentor, soothing you through the tears that aren't quite genuine but aren't quite fake.

"You understand, now, don't you?" he murmurs, combing through your hair as you sniffle. "This is where you belong, pet. You don't need to fight."

You let your expression collapse like a house of cards, nodding limply. For what might be the first time, you aren't afraid when he smiles.

Because that's the thing with arrogant men like him–

They never, *ever* doubt if they're right.

—

The months drain past you like water through gravel. You watch, you observe, you listen – and good fucking god, do you *learn.*

After your meltdown, Silas returns some crumbs of autonomy to you. You're granted the *privilege* of going outside on occasion – tailed by guards and at his discretion, of course. Every aspect of your life is still chained to his desires, but with every month that passes, you loosen the binds just a millimeter further, oiled by your apparent compliance.

You get in the habit of spending more time with him while he's working in his office; your skin crawls whenever he touches you, but your best vantage point is right on his lap, so you grit your teeth and bear it. You ply him with sex whenever his hands wander, because although you want to break off every one of his fingers, the information you glean in your periphery from his work documents is quite valuable. He's in charge of some very important decisions, you discover – and he's responsible for the displacement and deaths of many, *many* civilians. The details are foggy, but he seems to handle the paperwork of some incredibly profitable gem mining networks. You can't imagine how many people he's sentenced to death because they were unlucky enough to be living on valuable land.

(You can't stop thinking about your father – about that damn article. *Where Will the Cruelty End?* Every time he crosses your mind, you recall all of the times that people said you took after him rather than your mother, which she always seemed a bit bitter about.)

(You never intended to follow his legacy – but it seems like it followed you instead.)

Even mere glimpses of those papers make you nauseous, but if there's some sliver of a chance that you'll find something of use, you can't let it slip away. And, as it turns out, you were right to think so. You've been seeing mentions about some kind of criminal that's been a huge pain for his supply chain, and you've caught snippets of some of his other crimes in the documents: arson, theft, destruction of property, and even kidnapping and murder of IPC members, though their ranking is unclear. One day, you even catch a sliver of a photo from some kind of security footage; all you manage to see before the paper is turned are his sharp eyes and even sharper teeth, but it's enough to tell you one important fact–

A man with a gaze like that is *not* meant to be trifled with.

It's an extremely promising lead, but you'll need more information if you want to actually use it – so you bide your time, waiting for Silas to make that final, fatal slip.

—

People have always thought you were stupid, ever since you became involved with Silas; you're convinced it's the persona he's forced you to adopt ever since he closed his claws around you, or the way he handles you like his ditzy little trophy wife that could never hurt a fly – a pretty, empty-headed doll that's never dealt with anything troublesome in her life. It's something you've always resented, but never corrected. Now, you're thankful you never went through the trouble – because people are very, *very* loose-lipped when they think you're stupid.

It's from the mouth of the devil himself that you first hear the name *Boothill.*

Silas has you in his lap in one of the lounge's private rooms, idly thumbing just a bit too low at your waist like the lecher he is as he contemplates his poker hand; you don't even need to peek at the others to know he's going to win regardless of how good it is. ("Word of advice, sweetie? Never trust a man that's too good at poker," your mother once said, only days after you'd graduated high school. "They're all rotten liars.")

Silas is sipping at his scotch, ranting with his scumbag coworkers about something or other; you're only paying enough attention to keep an ear out for potential escape routes, not to truly absorb any of the endless drivel about money, money, *money.* You always despise when he has this group over at the lounge, because they all get tipsy, and tipsy means *handsy,* and Silas is only possessive when it serves to piss you off, so he loves letting these disgusting fucking *pigs* put their hands on you – like you're a little toy that he wants to show off to his friends.

("It's just a bit of fun, pet," he always sighs, as if *you're* the one being difficult. "You love wearing those skimpy dresses when you perform. How's this any different?")

(He never acknowledges that he's the one that has complete control of your wardrobe. *God,* you can't wait to break his fucking fingers. You'll shatter his knees under the highest heels in your closet. You'll make him choke on his teeth after you bash them in with this wretched fucking collar. You'll make him choke on this hideous wedding ring. You'll– well. Best not to get too carried away, lest you break character.)

Now, as he leisurely gestures with his cards, he huffs, "And I've lost damn near five percent of my profit because of this mess."

The pig-nosed man to your right pipes up, simmering with anger. "And of *course* none of those stupid fucks at the security department can catch the guy. What was his name?"

You can't see it from your position, but you get the feeling that Silas is scowling like he's just stepped in shit. "Boothill. Just some idiot hick, but nobody's managed to kill him yet. I'd say they should just double his bounty and be done with it."

"Did you hear about that shipment of pure Caladorian ore he destroyed last quarter? The astronium?" the blonde across from you spits. "A good portion of that was *my* stock. *Exploded!* He didn't even steal it!"

The stoic, long-haired man on your left sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I could live with the losses, truthfully, but the press has gotten so noisy about him that it's starting to piss me off."

The pig-nosed one takes a sip of his own drink, the ice clinking against the glass like the rustle of a rattlesnake. "Didn't he kill that Vidyadhara bitch of yours, Jenn? Heard something about that yesterday."

The lanky man who's been otherwise silent sighs in what can only be irritation. "Yeah – kidnapped her while she was under triple security, no less. Horrible timing. All I needed was

her signature to close that deal." He takes a sip of his scotch, a sour look on his face. “Ugh. All of that sex for *nothing.* The bitch couldn't give good head to save her life.”

(You resent that you've grown so used to their blatant misogyny. They'll say the most disgusting, lecherous things about women – including *you,* but that's hardly shocking – as if you aren't sitting right there. They treat you like you're little more than decor; the only thing that makes it tolerable is the fact that you can benefit from their stupidity.)

More importantly, though…

Kidnapped under triple security? That certainly piques your interest. If you recall correctly, they're talking about a woman you've only ever known as Weasel. She is– well, *was* a very powerful information broker tied to the IPC, known best for her paranoia and shrewd practices. Her normal security was apparently already absurd, and if this guy managed to get to her with *three times* that amount...

Well, perhaps you're more acquainted with his deeds than you would've guessed.

—

You had friends, before Silas locked you away in this ivory tower; perhaps your closest was Iris. You met her in school, so long ago that you can't even remember it. Between the two of you, she was the clever, mischievous one – and perhaps that's where you got your wits from, because she always knew just how to push your buttons in a way that made you want to be better than her. You got up to all sorts of trouble as teens; the most memorable was when you decided to pass poorly coded notes during class, and when you got caught, you refused to tell your teacher what it meant – so the clever old hag decoded it herself and read out whatever embarrassing nonsense you'd written about dating or after-school plans or what-have-you.

Thus began what you both liked to call the Code Wars – you and her versus Miss Kravitz.

It became a contest of how complex you could make your codes, how sneakily you could pass your notes, the difficulty ramping higher and higher when your teacher kept catching you. You came up with secret passphrases to cheat on tests; whenever you needed help, you'd write, verbatim, *“We should hang out soon.”* After, you'd ask about a specific date – however many days ahead it was from the present indicated which question you needed the answer for. Then, if the receiver didn't know the answer either, they'd indicate how fucked the two of you were by asking the sender if they wanted to play games. Video games were the mildest, followed by checkers, blackjack, poker, or, god fucking forbid, *chess* – which both of you were absolute shit at, hence its place as the most brutal.

So, when you write a letter to a woman you haven't even been able to text in years, asking if she'd like to play chess sometime – the sooner the better, but you can be patient – you can only pray. You write down your measurements, asking her to make a dress for you to wear during your next big show – an event for some very important figures in the IPC. *I'm a bit*

uncertain on the details, you write, *but I have a rough idea of what I'd like done. Perhaps we could schedule a consultation?*

You're certain the letter is going to be checked thoroughly before it even leaves the building – most likely by Silas himself. The framing as a surprise will buy you some wiggle room, which you'll need desperately. *Keep this on the down-low if you can,* you write. *It needs to be a surprise for my husband.*

(The last time you spoke to Iris, you said something about being terrified that Silas was going to try to marry you. She told you to run, naturally – but she wasn't as familiar with the inner workings of the IPC as you were. She didn't see the mutilated bodies of the people that showed him the slightest disrespect – never by his own hand, but instead callously passed off to his lackeys. She didn't see the guillotine that still hangs over your neck to this very day, ready to plunge downward at any moment. She didn't see the cold look in your mother's eye the first and only time you tried to reach out to her for help. "You got yourself into this mess, sweetie," she said blandly, looking down at her phone in apparent disinterest. "I can't afford to make an enemy of your paramour. You're on your own." Maybe you'll kill her one day, too.)

(Now, you pray Iris remembers the fear in your eyes when you last hugged her goodbye for the evening. You can only hope that it wasn't for the final time.)

Last you knew, she was working as a tailor in a very high-end shop, climbing her way up the ladder until she got better and better projects. In the years that have passed, it's perfectly reasonable to assume that she moved on. You have to hope against hope that she hasn't.

When it's time to send the letter out, you think carefully about which maid you'll choose to target. The most skittish of them all is too obvious, so you'll instead go for the sweetest: Willow, the one that seems to grant you the most leeway, and the one that will probably make the best case for you when she inevitably reports you. (You suspect all of the maids and guards are under strict orders to report any suspicious behavior on your part. You're very confident that this will slip past your wretched husband's watch, however – even when it passes right under his nose.)

You approach her one afternoon while Silas is out and she's tidying up. "Willow, dear... Could I ask a favor of you?"

She jumps to attention in an instant. "Oh, of course, Mrs. Morghani!"

(You fight back the urge to gag. *Ugh.* You've tried telling the maids not to call you that, framing it as if you simply think it's too formal. None of them have ever listened; you have to wonder if Silas ordered them to do that just to piss you off.)

You smile through your disgust, making a show of looking around for any potential eavesdroppers – the perfect picture of a stupid, airheaded trophy wife. "Well... I have a letter I need delivered. Oh, but Silas can't know. It's a surprise."

It's very subtle, and you probably would've missed it if you weren't watching so closely, but you can see a particular look cross her eyes – a look that tells you that she's absolutely going

to be handing this directly to Silas, first and foremost.

Willow leans in, dropping her voice. "A surprise? What for, ma'am?"

You give her a secretive little smile. "Well, there's that big event coming up – the one for the IPC? I really would like to look the part, and nothing in my wardrobe feels appropriate." Then, you wink. “So I'm thinking of getting a dress commissioned – one that Silas will love, I'm sure."

Willow makes a noise of understanding, smiling innocently as you pass her the envelope. “Of course, Mrs. Morghani. I'll deliver it to her myself.”

(You find it a bit frightening that, if you weren't already certain she was going to sell you out, you never would've guessed she was deceiving you.)

—

You have to bite back tears when Willow brings you a response letter only two days later. You smile evenly as you thank her, careful not to seem too excited as you open the envelope.

The moment you see that Iris mentions "catching up with Miss Kravitz just the other day," you know your real message was received; your old teacher died in your last year of school. You resist the urge to scan the letter thoroughly right then and there, determined to keep up appearances. She does mention that she'd appreciate some broad details for what you'd like the dress to look like, which gives you the perfect excuse to contemplate with the letter in hand.

You offhandedly mention to Willow that you'll need to write a response, and you'll need some time to pin down what exactly you'd like the seamstress to make. "Check back with me tomorrow, won't you? I should have everything down by then."

Then, you get to work.

Iris mentions that she'd be happy to schedule an appointment, and asks if a date between five to seven days from the mailing date would be acceptable. You scrutinize it for a moment, uncertain what exactly she could be pointing to – if anything at all. You check the capitalized letters – nothing. You check the vertical columns at the start of each line – nothing. You stare at the fifth line and the fifth sentence, then the seventh, certain that there must be something there...

Then, a memory snaps into place.

One of the last tricks you'd come up with back in school involved hiding a message throughout a note by looking at letters a certain interval apart. You'd usually count by fives, since that was often the easiest. And sure enough…

The fifth letter of the fifth sentence is a G. The tenth letter in the same sentence is a U. Five more is an A. Then, counting into the sixth sentence gives an R. Then, a D. Counting into the seventh gives an S – and that sentence ends with a question mark.

GUARDS?

You have to clench your teeth to stop yourself from leaping out of your chair in excitement. That *can't* be a coincidence.

Every time you leave the penthouse – which isn't often, because Silas has very little tolerance for even the slightest shows of independence – you're accompanied by two IPC guards, though you suspect that you're also followed by at least one plainclothes agent as well. They *could* be a problem, but you'll get the opportunity to be alone with Iris when you're trying on the dress.

You write back that the seventh day would work perfectly – and it would, because you actually had no shows planned for you then. In the seventh line, using the same method that she did, you hide your response: *TWO?*

After that, you get to work on the specifications for the dress itself, though that part is mostly an afterthought. You'd like it to be red, you think; the color of blood should be the last thing that Silas sees. You add that you'd like it to be breathable, and not too difficult to move around in; you say that it's because you want to do a bit of dancing for your show, but you're really thinking about how miserable it would be to torture your wretched husband if you were in an obscenely tight corset. You tell her to take as many liberties as she likes, since you trust her judgement wholeheartedly – which is the truth, because she was always more fashionable than you.

With that, you mark the day on the calendar with shaking fingers, then hand off your letter to Willow once more.

You can't remember the last time you were this thrilled about something, nor the last time you really had something to look *forward* to.

Now, you just have to avoid fucking it all up.

—

The day of your meeting arrives mercifully quickly. You exercise your tiny privilege to ask your guards about going on a little shopping trip, and the fact that they don't ask Silas first is incredibly telling. You direct the driver to the shop that Iris works at, fighting every muscle in your body to stop yourself from shaking.

The door chimes as you step inside, a faint and pleasant floral scent singing in your nose. One of your guards follows inside and stands menacingly by the door, while the other

remains just outside. You'd visited Iris at work a few times, a lifetime ago, and it's just as obscenely fancy as you remember it being – though you could swear that the dresses on display are even more intricate. Her handiwork, you'd wager.

You're barely kept waiting for a minute before she strides out from behind the curtain to the fitting room. She's aged quite nicely in your absence, you'd say; her cheeks are still a bit plump with that charming baby fat she never managed to lose, and her eyes are sharper than ever. She's dyed her hair a dark, metallic purple, fading to black toward the roots – a deliberate choice, no doubt, because her natural color is black. She was always pragmatic in her stylistic choices.

You can't help but smile, soft and earnest, as you meet her gaze; the expression feels alien on your face. Her eyes brighten with glee, but you can tell she's restraining herself for the sake of appearances; Silas knows that you were friends, no doubt – you learned very quickly that he had an unbelievable amount of surveillance on you from the day you met – but for all he's concerned, you merely drifted apart. Hysterical, really, because he was the one that facilitated your isolation.

"It's so good to see you again," you say as she walks closer, and you wonder if that might be the first genuine, completely innocuous thing you've said in months – maybe even years. "I'm sorry for being absent for so long, but I've been very busy. You know how it goes."

"Oh, nonsense," she huffs, waving you off. "I know you have your reasons, sweetheart. I'm just glad you're here."

You make small talk for a moment, chattering idly, doing your best not to seem too eager. Before long, though, she says, "Well, enough dilly-dallying! Let's get to work, love."

She leads you to the dressing room, holding the curtain back for you and ducking in after; she always was obscenely tall. The moment the curtain falls behind you, Iris pins you with a subtle, questioning gaze.

You nod your head briskly, covering your eyes. *They can't see us.*

She points at her mouth, then her ear. *Can anyone hear what we're saying?*

You nod again, pinching that horrible collar for emphasis, then motion like you're writing on your palm. *Yes. Writing only.*

"Alright," she suddenly chirps, innocent as can be. "I'm actually running a bit behind, so I'll need a moment to get everything ready." As she speaks, she plucks a small notebook from her pocket, clicking the pen in time with a syllable to hide the noise. "I'm very sorry for the delay."

"Not a problem at all," you reply, carefully taking the book from her as she guides you to sit on the chaise lounge beside her. Your fingers shake subtly around the pen as you ready it over the paper.

You cut straight to the meat of things. *I need someone to kill Silas to ever stand a chance of escaping,* you write, *and I think I know of someone that could get the job done. Do you know the name Boothill?*

Yes, Iris writes quickly. *You want me to try contacting him?*

If you can. I have an opportunity that could help him take down dozens of IPC higher-ups. If he attacks on the night of my next big show, they'd all be in the same place. I'll need some way to disable this collar or communicate silently if he wants to meet ahead of time.

Iris nods slowly as she reads your message. *I'll convince him.*

Be careful, you write, almost frantically. *Silas might have someone watch you after this. He can pull Synesthesia Beacon records for location pings, and he'll probably watch your calls and texts.*

Her brow furrows, but not in a distressed manner. No, this is a look you became quite familiar with in school–

That's the look she makes when she's facing a difficult problem, getting ready to either vault straight over it or dismantle it with her bare hands. And by fucking *god,* she *always* does it.

So when she unflinchingly writes, *I'll figure it out,* you can't help but believe her. *I'll burn these notes the moment you leave.*

I owe you my life, you reply with a shaking hand, swallowing hard through the tension building in your throat. (The words don't even come close to properly expressing your gratitude.)

She gives you the sweetest, gentlest smile you've ever seen on her face, and you have to squeeze your eyes shut to hold back tears – even more so when she places a tender hand atop yours, stroking her thumb over your knuckles. You take a deep, deep breath, turning your hands to link your fingers and squeezing her tightly. Your chest aches with an inescapable yearning, so strong that it nearly strangles you.

Then, you put the pen back onto the paper. *Go time.*

She nods, standing slowly and walking toward the back. She ducks behind the curtain and returns only a moment later with a dress on a hanger, zipped safely in a garment bag. “So sorry for the wait. Everything is good to go now.”

“You're perfectly fine, dear,” you say, fixing the same plastic smile on your face that you've been wearing for years.

The rest of the visit is like an elaborate game of pretend, and you despise how easily you sink back into your role as a ditzy little trophy wife. Your awe when she reveals the dress is quite genuine, though; it's drop-dead gorgeous. It's the color of a vibrant red wine, fading into black toward the bottom hem. The ruffled fabric sparkles like it's made of glitter, but the texture is sinfully soft against your skin. It's quite tasteful, framing your bust without being

lewd, and although there is a deep cut in the back, your skin is still covered by a thin window of sheer fabric; it strikes a perfect balance of feeling provocative, yet actually remaining rather conservative. (Good. The less these pigs pay attention to your body, the better. Their eyes make your skin crawl.) The most eye-catching part of it all is the *rubies,* set in silver and woven masterfully into an intricate pattern of lace.

Admittedly, your favorite feature of the entire thing is probably the pockets hidden into the folds. If you needed any more proof that Iris still knows you perfectly, you need look no further.

And, sure enough, it fits you like a glove. Briefly, you wonder just how many all-nighters she had to pull to get this done so quickly – especially considering that this was supposed to be the *consultation,* but you suppose she's always been an overachiever.

For a spell, you can't help but admire yourself in the mirror, tracing the curve of your waist and the way the fabric curls around your thighs.

You… You can't remember the last time you *wanted* to wear a dress. Even when you bought things yourself, it was always for a *purpose* – to soften up Silas for one of your investigations, or to distract him with sex instead of interrogating you about your scheming, or any number of things.

But *this?* This would be something you'd buy for yourself.

“Iris, this is…” you breathe, running your fingers gingerly along the gems. “This is… phenomenal.”

Her smile is sweet and earnest. “It's only because you're wearing it, love. You really make it shine.”

You smile – a soft, tender thing, wavering at the edges. “You're too sweet for your own good.”

She says there are a few places she needs to tighten or loosen, just to make sure it's perfect, although you admittedly wonder if it's just a ploy, because you could swear it already fits you flawlessly. The appointment is unfortunately brief, since you don't want to arouse any suspicion; you're fortunate that Silas has made the mistake of letting you visit an old friend, and you don't want to push your luck. You hug her tightly before you leave, and your body feels strange; you don't think you've felt a pleasant touch in years, and although you thought you'd surpassed the loneliness, it seems like these crumbs are enough to awaken your ravenous appetite.

You'll have to starve for a while longer, unfortunately.

—

Some time later, you receive another letter; your heart pounds in anticipation as you take it from Willow. In the note, Iris asks if you could schedule one more appointment to be absolutely certain that the dress didn't need any more tweaks. *I made a few more modifications,* she adds, *but I'd like to double check that it fits perfectly. I want you looking your best!*

The real purpose of the message becomes clear when she mentions meeting ten to twelve days from now. Sure enough, you use the same technique – though you're momentarily confused when it spits out gibberish. You try a few different intervals, finally landing on three; she must've decided to change it just to be safe.

Your confusion only increases when you see her message.

KIDNAP.

Not a question – a *statement.*

Well, that's... a bit more vague than you'd like.

Is it a distress signal? Is she saying *she* was kidnapped? Surely she would've added some kind of other signifier… right? A “help,” at the very least?

As it is, you don't think you have any way to help her either way – not yet. You write back, though you can't spend as much time as you'd like working on it, lest you draw suspicion by spending too much time writing what should be a simple letter. In the return note, you add, *Please let me know if I can assist you in any way. If nothing else, I would love to spend time with you again.*

You hate this feeling – this terror, this dread, this helplessness.

The only thing you can do now is wait.

—

The explanation comes only two days later, to your surprise.

You're out shopping for a gift for Iris in return for all of the hassle you've doubtlessly put her through – though you refuse to consider the increasing possibility that you'll never have the chance to give it to her. You've paused outside of an antique store, peering through the window at the quaint little figurines they have on display. There's an incredibly cute sculpture of a chameleon with a sun hat that reminds you of her. Idly, you wonder if she still likes reptiles, just like she did years ago.

Worth checking out, at least. You hum, grabbing onto the door handle to–

You hear the glass shatter before you hear the gunshot.

Blood splatters on the window next to you; there's a clattering noise, like dead weight and armor hitting concrete.

The streets erupt into chaos and screaming.

You hear one of your guards – perhaps the only remaining one – blurt out a string of curses as she grabs you and pulls you down, covering you with her body as she barks into her communicator.

“This is Agent S-421! Officer down! Suspect is armed–”

Another gunshot, and her weight hits you like a brick wall, crushing you into the sidewalk below. Two more shots – they sound closer than the others – and then a final *bang* rings through the air; you think you hear another body hit the ground some ways away. You hold your breath, staring wide-eyed at the reflections in the glass door, frantically trying to locate the shooter.

You hear his spurs before you see him. They jingle with every step, cutting right through the cacophony from the crowd around you.

The first thing you see is the red glint of his eyes.

You know that face. You've seen it while subtly peeking at Silas's files, in wanted posters, once or twice on the news–

It's Boothill, and he's walking right toward you.

Your heart stops dead in your chest when he hauls the corpse off of you single handedly, the helmet hitting the concrete with a brutal *crack.* His lethal eyes meet yours in the reflection of the blood-stained glass. He's *smiling,* so wide that you swear you can see every single one of his sharp, menacing teeth.

“Sorry ‘bout this, ma’am,” he drawls as he levels the barrel of his gun to the back of your head, “but you'll be comin’ on a lil’ trip with me.”

Well.

This is… unexpected.

Very, very slowly, you get to your feet, swallowing heavily; you turn with all the caution of a rabbit being hunted by a fox, clenching your jaw as your heart pounds faster and faster. His grin widens into something feline and satisfied when you meet his eyes.

“I knew you'd be a good sport,” he purrs, looking far too pleased.

He leads you into an automatic taxi that waits on the street, oh-so-politely slamming the door behind you once you climb inside. Your skin prickles when he gets in on the other side, lounging in the seat like you’re a cute couple off on a date. His revolver remains in his hand, but he isn’t aiming it at you – and he barely looks at you as the cab takes off down the road, winding down the streets.

All the while, your mind is running a mile a minute. Is this what Iris meant when she said *kidnap?* You're not exactly sure what you were expecting, but you can't say *this* ever occurred to you.

It's only when you arrive at a nearly empty shipyard that you realize what exactly he's planning. He gets out first, circling around to open the door for you; he'd be the perfect picture of a gentleman if not for the pistol held loosely in his hand.

"Ladies first," he drawls, gesturing to a small transport ship sitting nearby, its hatch sliding open.

(How *polite.)*

You do *not* appreciate that you have to turn your back to him to climb up the ramp, but you grit your teeth and bear it. His spurs clink as he follows after you, the hatch closing with an ominous hiss. You turn just in time to watch him holster his gun, and although you're careful to create some distance, that does admittedly soothe your heart a bit.

"Now, why don't ya sit right there while I get us movin', yeah?" he says pleasantly. "We've got plenty to chat about. I'd hate for somebody to *interrupt."*

Without waiting for a reply, he strides off to the cockpit without looking back.

You sigh as he disappears, resting one hand on your chest to settle your racing heart. You'd hoped that all of these years living in the lion's den would've toughened you, but it seems like it's only made you more skittish – as demonstrated by the way you flinch when the ship whirrs to life under your feet, causing you to sway as it takes off.

…Best to sit down now, in case he jumps into hyperspace.

Sure enough, only a few minutes later, you feel the tell-tale buzz of energy begin to build in the walls, singing a chorus in your bones; you can't remember the last time you felt the sublime hum of FTL travel against your skin – like the sweet tang of freedom on your tongue, rich and full and tantalizing. The entire ship jolts as it enters supercruise, the aged hull groaning against the pressure of warping space.

The moment the ship settles, you stand again, eager to stay on your feet – and not thirty seconds later, Boothill strolls out of the cockpit, his gaze pinning you down.

"Now, I've heard some *real* interestin' things 'bout that husband a' yours," he begins without fanfare, tilting his head as he examines you. "N' I've heard *you're* sweeter than honey. Surely you can help a fella out, huh? Just got a few questions for ya."

For a heartbeat, you actually wonder if this is a genuine kidnapping – if you've just set yourself up as a victim that won't get so much as a morsel in return.

But then, he reaches up, tapping his neck – right where your collar rests on you.

You swallow heavily and nod, right before you stutter, "I– I don't know what you've heard, but I'm– I don't know anything."

He hums as if in disbelief, and when he takes a step toward you, your heart skips despite yourself. “Oh, I'm not so sure ‘bout that, miss.” Another step; you clench your jaw, fighting the urge to back up. “But first… That's an awfully pretty necklace, huh?”

You add just the right amount of alarm in your voice when you say, “W–Wait, don't– It was a gift.”

The way he laughs sends a shiver up your spine. “It's cute that ya think I give a rat's ash,” he coos, taking another step, bringing him within reach of you. “Now sit still so I can get a better look.”

You remain perfectly motionless, but he snarls like you'd disobeyed. He reaches down toward his revolver, and your heart jumps into your throat, but when he puts his hand on it, he only cocks it with a loud, ominous *click,* leaving it holstered.

“You deaf, ya stupid lil' fudgehead?” he growls, but his eyes are perfectly calm, if a bit amused. “I told ya to *sit still,* ya forkin' brat.”

Slowly, almost carefully, he reaches up toward your neck, and you have to fight to keep your pulse in check. He's helping you. He's *helping you,* god damn it.

(This reaction – this instinctual terror – isn't because of Silas. This is *not* because of Silas. It can't be. That fucking rat bastard could never damage you like that. This must be from something else – something unrelated. It’s perfectly reasonable to be skittish in a scenario like this. Perfectly understandable.)

His cold, metal fingers brush your throat as they clench around the collar, and bizarrely, something about how they feel nothing like flesh is soothing to you. Then, without so much as an ounce of strain, he breaks the accursed fucking thing in half, pulling it away in two pieces of dense metal and garish diamonds. The moment he does, you reach up to your neck, carefully running your fingers across the skin that was hidden beneath.

(You can't remember the last time you took a breath that wasn't at least slightly strained by the weight of the metal. You can't remember when you became used to it, either.)

He gives the collar an evaluating look, twisting the pieces around in his hands. Then, he barks out a laugh.

“Ha! Shoot, I'm good,” he chuckles, tapping a tiny, almost invisible removable plate on the back. “I knew the energy signature on this fudgin’ thing was weird. Bet ya were hopin’ I wouldn't find the tracker in this bad boy, huh? Too bad.”

Then, he unceremoniously drops it to the ground and slams his foot down into it. You watch with no small amount of satisfaction as the metal bends and crunches beneath his heel, the diamonds sparkling as they come loose. Never in your life have you thought it looked beautiful – not until this very moment, watching as the tool of your imprisonment is shattered beneath the ruthless heel of a stranger.

Once he's done, he crouches down, sifting through the pieces for a moment before he finds some kind of electric component. He holds it up to the light for only a moment before he crushes it to dust in his palm.

Finally, all is silent except for the quiet hum of the ship. He gives you a questioning look as he stands, his brows raised.

You take a deep, cleansing breath; you can't remember the last time your body felt so light.

For the first time in years, you speak without being strangled by that collar – without your every word being recorded for that rotten bastard to sift through.

“Should be all clear, now.”

He gives you a once-over, nonchalantly reaching back toward his revolver to decock it. “Don't see nothin’ on my scanners, so I'll wager you're right.”

A moment passes before you smile, wide and broad and earnest; it feels unfamiliar on your face. Then, you hold out your hand for him to shake, grinning ear-to-ear. “It's *wonderful* to finally meet you, Boothill.”

He blinks at you for a moment, then laughs, bright and loud. “Oh, you're a funny one, huh?” Without fuss, he clasps your hand in his, giving it a firm shake; the cool metal of his palm is strangely pleasant against your skin. “The pleasure’s all mine, miss. Heard you've got a pest problem?”

“Oh, more than just a problem,” you say, your smile sharpening into something dangerous. “It's a damn infestation.”

A lethal glint shines in his eyes. “Well, consider me your exterminator.”

(Oh, you like him already.)

"I'll cut through the noise, then,” you say, a harder look entering your gaze. “I can deliver Silas to you – and an entire pig sty of IPC executives – on a silver platter.” You pin him with an evaluating look. "But I have a few conditions."

He raises a brow at you, perhaps a bit skeptically. "I don't do *bargains,* but now you've got me curious. Shoot."

When you smile, you suspect you look like the perfect picture of the devil ready to snatch up the soul of a sinner. "You'll help me pull out his teeth, and then you'll let me pull the trigger. And once you wrap up your business with the lounge, I'd like you to blow the place to hell."

His brows just about shoot into his hairline, and when he looks at you now, it's clearly in a new light. He breathes out a chuckle caught between blatant admiration and disbelief. Slowly, he drawls, "Why the teeth?"

You cock your head innocently. "Well, he always loved threatening to cut out my tongue. 'What's a songbird without its tongue,' he'd say." Then, your smile twists impossibly higher,

your canines glinting in the light. "So let me ask you this: what's a snake without its fangs?"

There's a brief pause before he laughs, deranged and delighted. "Oh, I think we're gonna get along *just* fine, partner."

You hum in agreement, your smile settling into something more pleasant. “Wonderful. Let's get to the meat of things, then.”

Over the next twenty minutes or so, the two of you hash out the details – the most critical information about the operations of the IPC that you've gleaned over the years, as well as potential weak points he could exploit at a later date. Then, you go into detail about the upcoming event – who's going to be there, the layout of the floor, the typical placement of the guards, the start and estimated end time, your overall plan, so on and so forth. Boothill agrees that the upcoming meeting at the lounge would be the perfect time to strike.

“Like shootin’ fish in a barrel,” he drawls. “Two floors down from the roof, ya said?”

“Yes. You'll have a rather tedious task ahead of you if you choose to go straight up from the ground floor, not to mention all of the rigmarole to get access to the elevators, so I recommend trying to get access from the roof if you can.” You tilt your head, considering the height of the buildings that surround it. “There's a few helipads on the top of the building – heavily guarded, as you can imagine. It's the tallest tower for a good few blocks, but there's one that’s about half the height just beside it. Make of that what you will.”

He hums in thought. “And the whole buildin’ is full to forkin’ burstin’ with those IPC muddle-fudgers?”

You absolutely should *not* find his odd vocabulary charming, but you frankly can't help yourself. “It's one of their critical headquarters on the planet, yes.” Then, you eye him a bit more carefully, trying to feel out his intentions. “Why? Are you planning on leaving a little *gift* for them?”

He grins so wide that you can almost see all of his teeth. “I dunno,” he says, his eyes sparkling. “Would ya call bringin’ the whole buildin’ down a gift?”

You laugh openly, delight curling in your heart. “A gift to *me,* certainly.”

You're interrupted by a series of quick, harsh beeps from the cockpit.

“Son of a bench,” he hisses. “Was wonderin’ when they'd show up. They're ‘bout to interdict us. Get ready.”

A note of dread rings in the back of your mind. Back to your tormentor, you suppose. “Alright,” you reply with no small amount of bitterness, sitting yourself in one of the corners of the room as Boothill turns to walk into the cockpit.

Now, you just need to make yourself cry.

(You have quite a bit in the backlog, so it probably won't be very difficult.)

“Wait. One more thing,” you say quickly, an idea striking you. “You should backhand me.”

He whips around to look at you so quickly that it almost looks like *he* was slapped. “What the *fudge* did you just say?”

You sigh, anxiety tickling the back of your throat, winding tighter in your chest. “Slap me. Leave a bruise if you can. It'll make this seem more legitimate.”

He gawks at you like you've just transformed into a five-headed hydra before his very eyes. Finally, after several seconds of silence, he shakes his head. “No way. I– I don't know what kinda man you think I am, miss, but–”

“Forget it, then.” As the knot unwinds from around your heart, you're torn between frustration and gratitude. “Could you at least tie my hands?”

This is the first time you've seen him look even *remotely* uncomfortable, which is incredible considering all of the terrible things you've heard he's done to IPC employees of all types. *This* is all it takes to get him squeamish?

“Guess I can do that,” he mumbles, looking distinctly displeased.

You turn and hold your wrists behind your back, simultaneously trying to harness your fear, your anger, your grief. As he winds the rope around your wrists, you clench your eyes shut and imagine instead that it's Silas, that you're back in that prison of a penthouse, that he's about to put his disgusting hands on you again. You think about all the time he's stolen from you – how many years he's wasted keeping you as his caged pet. You think about how little he truly appreciates you – your skill, your personality, your wit, your intelligence.

You can feel the budding tension behind your eyes, but no tears yet.

Deeper, then.

As Boothill ties the final knot in the rope, you dig further into the recesses of your mind, unearthing the fears you've never allowed yourself to fully unpack. You think about how terrified you've always been that Silas was going to pass you around that poker table to let those fucking pigs do more than just touch you. You think about the ever-expanding fear that he'll get bored of you now that you've stopped outwardly struggling, and that he could order one of your supposed guards to shoot you at any time. You think about the paranoia you've held all this time that he was going to find you out – that he'd figure out this plot of yours and use that fucking collar on you until it fried your brain and truly left you mindless and helpless.

Heat prickles in your waterline, but it's not enough.

So you finally think about what might be the most terrifying piece of all of this: Silas finding out about Iris’s involvement.

You think of him having her kidnapped and brought to that wretched fucking penthouse, of heartless lackeys tying her up and holding both of you in the living room. You think of them

flaying her alive, of the way she'd scream, of the way her blood would stain that pristine white carpet.

(And, in a way, it would be your fault, too.)

The dam finally bursts, and the tears spill down onto your cheeks. You need to be careful here; you can't let yourself slip too deep, or you'll lose it all, but you need to keep the tears going. You shut your eyes tighter, clenching your fists as you focus on the precarious balance beam you've been forced onto.

“Hey,” Boothill says suddenly, his voice uncharacteristically soft. You open your blurry eyes to find him kneeling in front of you, and–

Is that… Is that genuine concern on his face?

“What's goin’ on?” he asks, so gently that it actually makes your throat clench tighter. “You want me to untie ya?”

Your brain takes several seconds to catch up. “No, no,” you say quickly, sniffling through the tears. “I'm– I just need to make this look real. That rotten fucking bastard thinks I'm so pitiful that he'd get suspicious if I wasn't crying.”

You thought that would immediately dispel the worry in his gaze, but if anything, that seems to make it worse. His brow furrows, and he slowly nods. “...Right. Okay, that– Yeah.”

Then, he clears his throat and stands, and somehow *he's* more awkward about this than you are. Right when he opens his mouth again, the whole spacecraft jolts with a groan, rocking the ground underneath you. He belts out a colorful series of swears – well, *substitute* swears – as sirens begin to howl, leaping into the cockpit with a jangle of spurs.

Go time, then.

You clench your eyes shut once more, scooping up even more terror from that seemingly endless well to keep the tears coming. You're almost thrown onto your back from where you sit when the ship leaves hyperspace with a cantankerous wail, the walls rattling dangerously. Only half a minute later, there's the screech of metal on metal toward the hatch – no doubt they've latched on with a breacher bridge to pry it open. Sure enough, you can already hear the door starting to creak from the pressure – until Boothill yanks the ship hard in the other direction, and the connection breaks with a terrible groan.

You don't concern yourself with any of that. The true life or death scenario will come when you're “rescued.”

You keep the tears flowing, hoping that your eyes will be suitably red by the time they break in. You keep yourself hunkered down in the corner, bracing yourself as best you can with your hands tied behind you.

Suddenly, Boothill rushes out of the cockpit, scowling like he's just eaten a particularly sour lemon. You watch with some measure of confusion as he stops right in front of the hatch –

and then *leaps.* He grabs onto the ledge above the door, hauling himself up and precariously perching like a monkey in a tree.

When you give him a bewildered look, he merely grins, pressing a finger over his mouth as if to shush you.

…Well, you suppose you'll just have to wait and see.

Now, without him actively steering the ship away, the next attempt to bridge goes uncontested. The hatch groans, the hydraulics fighting to stay closed – until Boothill hits something on his wrist, and the doors fly open.

You're careful to make yourself look as pitiful as possible when five IPC guards come rushing in, guns at the ready. They sweep the room, confirming that it's clear except for you – to their knowledge, at least. One beelines straight for you, one stays to guard the hatch, two head to the cockpit, and one to what you assume is the cargo bay. All the while, you struggle not to so much as glance at the spot where Boothill is settled.

“Are you injured?” the guard asks you, kneeling down by your side and moving to cut the ropes binding you.

You shake your head with a sniffle, quickly squeezing your eyes shut so fresh tears run down your cheeks.

Then, a gunshot damn near makes you jump out of your skin.

Your eyes fly open just in time to watch as Boothill lands cleanly on his feet, the body of the one that was guarding the door falling limp to the floor. He leaps through the open hatch in a blink, saluting right as the guard next to you whips around, fumbling for his gun.

“Thanks for the new ship, fudgeheads,” Boothill laughs, and the doors promptly snap shut behind him right as the guard fires.

Well, he certainly has a flair for the dramatic.

(You can’t even pretend that you mind. You’re nothing if not a performer, after all.)

—

As you expected, Silas is utterly unconcerned about you; rather, he’s worried about the information you might’ve leaked.

The moment you get back to the penthouse, he practically hustles you into the living room to interrogate you. He doesn’t even bother asking if you’re alright before bombarding you with questions.

You tell him “that scary outlaw” demanded to know everything you knew about him and Jenn. “I– I didn’t know anything, other than that he comes by for poker sometimes,” you sob, hiding your face in your hands. *(And to stare at my chest like the fucking lecher he is,* you don’t bother adding.)

You can feel his icy, unsympathetic stare slicing into you. “And what did you tell him about me?”

“Nothing! There's– I don't even know what your job *is,* besides the department you're in,” you babble. “He was so angry, I thought– I thought he was going to–”

You force yourself to break down into hysterics, your whole body shaking. After a long moment, you hear Silas sigh, dramatic and weary. You have to grit your teeth to contain a flinch when he puts his hand on your head, petting you like you’re a fucking *dog.*

“It’s alright, pet,” he says, and that disgusting sweetness finally sinks into his voice. “You did well.”

You nod and sniffle, rubbing at your eyes to hide the fact that you can’t quite conjure any more tears.

When your lips tremble, you’re sure he thinks it’s because you’re about to cry again, but you’re really biting back a smile.

He doesn’t have a fucking *clue* just how well you did.

—

As you expected, Silas's security practically quadruples, and your leash becomes shorter than ever. Your appointment with Iris was cancelled, obviously, but it’s of little consequence other than admittedly disappointing you a bit. If all goes well, you'll be able to visit her many, many times after this.

The stage is set. Now, all you need to do is say your lines in rehearsal, and wait for the show to begin.

Silas, the fucking bastard, has your collar replaced before you even get to go to bed the night you were “kidnapped.” This one feels tighter, heavier, even more gaudy – but you're sure you're making it all up, because it looks identical to the last. The days creep by, hour by hour, minute by minute. You're finding it harder to keep up your mask now that you've truly gotten a taste of freedom. You keep having dreams of beating Silas to death, and every time you wake up, you *yearn.*

Patience, patience, patience. You'll get your dues very shortly.

(You also have a nightmare about the event coming and going without your rescuer coming in to steal the show. You dream of a thousand hands touching you, of a thousand eyes watching you, of a thousand ears tracking you; you're pinned by their horribly warm hands, bruising under their fleshy grip as they drag you down, down, down into the ocean of ink. No one comes to save you. No one answers your muffled, drowning screams. All of your planning, your plotting, your sleuthing, your struggling – it's all been for nothing.)

(You wake up with your face damp with tears, immeasurably grateful that Silas has already left for the morning.)

You refuse to think yourself into a corner when the final day dawns. You hold fast, keeping your mind on a single track; you know that if you let it stray, you'll be risking it all. When the event grows near, you don your new dress and prop yourself up with the most tolerable heels in your wardrobe; you think about piercing his eyes with them as you tighten the straps, and you can't help but smile.

You tolerate the touches of your makeup artist begrudgingly, and you bite your tongue through the tugs and pulls and yanks from your hair stylist, chanting in your mind that you'll never need to deal with this again after today. You'll get a gun, and you'll get training, and you'll shoot anyone that *dares* to touch you without asking.

By the time you're ready to walk on stage, your skin is prickling with irritation and you're gritting your teeth to stop yourself from biting the next person that touches you. You clench your jaw twice as hard when Silas strolls into the dressing room, his eyes roaming over you lecherously.

“Stunning as always, doll,” he says, and you have to smile as if the weight of his gaze doesn't make you want to rip off your skin. “That dress makes you look marvelous.”

You bat your lashes coyly, fussing with your necklace like the bashful little toy you're supposed to be. “Oh, you really think so? You're too kind.”

His chuckle is so smarmy and overconfident that it makes you want to scratch his eyes out. *Patience, patience, patience.* He wanders closer to you, running his fingers up your back; you hope your shiver reads as eagerness rather than disgust. “I know you're still a bit out of sorts from that, hm… incident. You'll be able to perform, won't you? I have quite a few important names in the audience, after all.”

(He isn't asking.)

You give him a shaky little smile for effect. “Of course, sweetie. I could *never* let you down.”

He pats your shoulder in a way that tells you he would've pet your head like a dog if he weren't worried about disturbing the elaborate knot your hair has been bound into. “Very good. We'll talk after, then.”

You manage to contain the full force of your smile until he closes the door behind him.

Oh, no. You'll do more than *talk.*

—

Despite the many, *many* eyes of important people on you tonight, the stage doesn't feel as horribly oppressive as it has these last few years.

You genuinely can't remember the last time you had *fun* performing. You've never enjoyed singing at the lounge, of course – not even on the first night, because you could already taste the danger in the air. The casino was just work; you prefer quieter venues anyway. Most things before that had paid so terribly that it spoiled the entire experience for you.

But *now?* Oh, you feel *alive.*

You're certain it shows in your performance, this fresh bout of liveliness and glee. You sing your fucking *heart* out – not for any of these worthless, disgusting rats, but for *yourself.* The lounge is rich with the sound of your voice, and the whole audience is spellbound, and you're certain you look positively *ethereal* in the spotlight – but you don't think about any of that. Instead, you think about how this will be the last show you ever perform at this wretched fucking place, and how you'll wake up tomorrow a free woman. You think about how you'll be able to wear comfortable, casual clothes; about how you'll be able to trim your nails however short you'd like, or bite them down for the hell of it; about how you'll be able to eat whatever junk food you want; about how you'll be able to sleep late whenever you damn well please without someone badgering you; about how you'll never step foot in that prison of a penthouse again; about how every drop of fear and paranoia and stress over this plan will be worth it when you get to plant a bullet in Silas's skull.

Your entire show goes flawlessly, and you let yourself breathe, playing for an audience of one – perhaps two, if Boothill is listening. You hit the high note in the final song perfectly, feeling your heart swell with joy, your lips curling–

And then that crazy fucking cyborg crashes through the window.

The entire world goes still as he rolls and bounces back onto his feet, a maniacal grin stretching across his face as he spins his revolver in his hand.

You hear his voice, loud and crisp in your ear, as if he was standing right next to you.

"Draw."

The world erupts.

Screaming and gunfire fill the entire space, and you don't hesitate before spinning around and ducking behind the curtain, rushing straight for the dressing room in the back to escape the crossfire; it would be frankly embarrassing if you went through all of this rigmarole only to die right before the finale. You slam the door behind you and lock it, the sounds muffled through the wall; the loudest noise of all is your heart beating wildly in your chest.

When you catch a glimpse of yourself in the mirror, you realize you're grinning just as wide as Boothill was.

Now, you wait – because the real show has yet to begin.

You sit down at your vanity without a care in the world, eager to free yourself from this horrendous updo and remove this wretched fucking makeup that you're forced to wear *every goddamn day.* You aren't putting on so much as a *speck* of mascara for a year at an absolute minimum. No necklaces, either.

With that thought in mind, you pause, turning your gaze down to the gaudy wedding ring that's remained like a brand on your finger all this time. You've always found it hideously ugly – and while you'd love to make him choke on it, you *are* still a pragmatic woman above all.

And there's truly no better fate for a ring like this than to be thoughtlessly sold – for it to be the foundation of your new life of freedom.

With a tiny smile, you wriggle it off of your finger and tuck it into one of the pockets hidden in the folds of your dress.

You continue to wipe every piece of your mask away, pulling out three dozen pins from your hair, letting your shoulders go lax to the tune of the slowly quieting gunfire coming from the rest of the lounge. When you finally toss the final makeup wipe aside, you take a moment to truly, *truly* look at yourself.

Were it not for this hideous collar, you would look more like yourself than you have in years – but you suppose that won't be a problem for much longer.

Damn, this dress looks good on you. You'll have to be careful when you're breaking Silas down into a pulp; it'd be a shame to stain it with pig's blood.

On that note…

By the time you come out of your daze, the building is utterly quiet. Perhaps if you weren't an accomplice, you might call it *too* quiet.

As it is? The only way it could be better is if you heard–

Then, just outside, you hear the subtle jangling of spurs.

Metal knuckles rap once, twice on the door.

"Knock knock, chickadee," comes Boothill's voice, cheerful and bright. "I've got a gift for ya."

You have to bite your tongue to stop yourself from snickering – then you remember that you don't need to anymore, and you burst into laughter. You walk over and undo the lock, smiling madly as you open the door.

And there he is: Boothill in all his glory – the true star of the show for the night, not a hair out of place, looking utterly untouched aside from the smears of red that coat him from head to toe. (You're certain not a drop of it is his own.)

“You look very handsome covered in blood,” you say earnestly, your lips curling higher as his eyes widen slightly, clearly caught off guard by such a direct, strangely-timed compliment. Before he can fire back with anything, your eyes fall to the mess of a man he's got slumped at his side.

Silas has been gagged with his own tie, his arms bound helplessly behind his back. He's got a fair amount of blood on him, smeared on his rumpled dress shirt, though he could certainly do with a bit more; it looks like his nose has been broken as well, because a veritable *fountain* of blood is gushing down from it. The cowboy’s metal fist is clenched ruthlessly in his hair, holding him up like a child does a broken doll.

You smile, wide and wicked and positively *lethal,* and sadistic delight curls in your chest at the way his eyes widen, darting between you and the cyborg.

Perhaps his miniscule brain is finally catching up.

“I see you've done marvelous work already,” you say, turning your gaze back to Boothill. Then, you step aside, opening the door wider with a grand gesture. “Won't you join me for a moment, darling?”

He chuckles, tipping his hat, all leisurely and gentlemanly. “Oh, it'd be my pleasure, angel.”

(From any other mouth, such a name would make your skin crawl – but you think it sounds rather sweet on his tongue.)

He steps inside, dragging Silas in by his hair; your lips twitch at the agonized look on his face, his brows wound tight. You close the door behind them, locking it with a *click,* just for effect. (It's not like anyone's alive to disturb you, after all.)

You turn just in time to watch Boothill drop him unceremoniously to the floor in a lump, wiping off his hands on his pants like he's just touched something absolutely vile – which you suppose he has.

“Sorry ‘bout the nose, by the way,” he drawls – but he's not talking to Silas. “Seems like your package got a lil’, heh, *damaged* in transit. Wanted him to be in *mint condition* for ya, but…”

Your lips twitch in open amusement. “Let me guess,” you say slowly. “He said something stupid, didn't he?”

He *harrumphs* in blatant disapproval. “More like *rude.”* He gives Silas a sharp glare, and you have to laugh at the way the sniveling little weasel flinches. “You ain't *ever* meant to talk about a lady like that. Bet you're real sorry now, huh?”

Your heart practically *sings* at the quiet whimper that escapes him.

“Got anything to drink in here, by the way?” Boothill drawls, completely nonchalant. “Worked up a mighty thirst takin’ out all that trash.”

You hum in thought as you stroll slowly towards Silas, your heels clicking on the tile, your eyes fixed on him like a cat stalking its prey. “There should be a small selection in the mini-fridge. They're all quite bad, to be frank – other than the whiskey, but that's because I picked it.” Then, you narrow your eyes accusingly. “You've always had horrible taste in drinks, Silas. Add that to the list.”

The moment Boothill starts to turn his back, the little rat starts to push himself away, sweating profusely. In a flash, Boothill whips around, aims, and *fires* – and for a heartbeat, you wonder if he actually shot him–

No. There *is* a fresh bullet hole *right* next to his knee, though.

“You'd best stay still, ya worthless shirtbag,” the cyborg growls, “‘less you're eager for me to put a bullet or two in your knees.”

What a *fantastic* idea.

But first…

“Just a moment,” you say mildly, strolling slowly towards them. You circle around to get a look at Silas's hands where they're tied behind his back, your eyes locking onto his watch. “Oh, wonderful.”

You kneel down, laughing openly at the way he flinches the moment you grab hold of his wrist. You quickly undo the buckle on his watch, sliding it off and pressing his thumb against the screen to unlock it. Then, you stand to examine it more closely. You fiddle with it for a moment, swiping between options and apps and menus in your search.

You're tempted to demand that he tell you the exact location of the collar controls and threaten to skin him alive if he doesn't, but you find the right menu before long. (Interestingly, you note that the default voltage is labeled as *dangerous.* Much to consider.) You tap the button to disengage the lock, then twice more to confirm.

The latch in the back opens with a *click.* You smile widely as you pull the wretched fucking thing away for the last time, your chest expanding with fresh air for what feels like the first time in ages.

Then, you turn to look at yourself in the vanity, finding the newly freed stretch of skin, and–

Is that…?

…

There's a scar below where it sat.

It's certainly faint, but it's undeniable. The place where the collar’s bottom edge rested has not only a deep indent where it pressed in, but also a broad surface of scar tissue where your

skin was rubbed raw, over and over and over. You stroke your thumb over the mark, feeling the slightly rough texture that you must've missed back in the ship.

(Now, you remember all of the times you've woken up in a cold sweat, your nails aching from scratching at the collar and your skin stinging from all of the movement. You just never realized– You never thought…)

Finally, your eyes drift just a few inches over, and you're a bit startled to find Boothill already looking at you in the mirror, his eyes uncharacteristically soft and somber.

“Should fade eventually, now that ya don't have the pressure on it,” he rasps, “but it never should've been there at all.”

…He's right.

And just like that, the kindling of your fury is lit anew.

With a flinty edge to your eyes, you spin around once more to look down at the subject of your rage; he's still facing opposite to you, held stiff by the threat of Boothill's revolver. Without a moment of hesitation, you bend down and fasten the collar around his throat, yanking it so hard that he chokes as you secure the latch.

Then, you stand, circling around until you can look Silas in the eye, your gaze burning with hatred. Slowly, you smile as you examine him.

“I think that looks much better on you, don't you think?” you say, your lips curling higher as you lift the watch in your hands.

His eyes widen just before you press the button to activate the collar.

He goes rigid as the shock bursts ruthlessly through him, his whole body shaking and spasming as it seizes him. A strangled noise escapes him, caught between a scream and a wail, but the muscles of his throat are so tight under the grip of the electricity that he's nearly strangled into silence. You keep the button held, watching dispassionately as he writhes, and you only let up when the faint scent of burning flesh meets your nose. He falls flat like a puppet with cut strings, twitching and spasming and coughing like a dying animal.

You watch him pant and heave for a long moment before Boothill smoothly flips his revolver in his hand, holding it out to you grip-first.

“Five more shots, partner. Lemme know if ya want more,” he says evenly, utterly unperturbed by the worm writhing by your feet. “Just so ya know, I'm sure some alarm got triggered while I was wreckin’ shop. I'm keepin’ an eye on the scanners, but I'll wager you've got about fifteen minutes before we gotta haul ash.”

The gun feels perfect in your palm – reassuringly heavy, cool and unyielding, sharp and deadly; the grip feels like it was made for your hand.

Oh, yes. This will do *nicely.*

“Fifteen minutes is all I'll need,” you purr, running your thumb slowly along the barrel. Then, you gesture toward the chair at your vanity. “Take a seat, darling.” You smile, tilting your head. “The real show is about to begin.”

He chuckles, deep and low in a way that makes your spine tingle pleasantly. He turns toward the fridge – to test out that whiskey, you wager.

Now, you finally turn your eyes back to the subject of your hatred.

He's always looked pathetic to you, but this is truly a new low. He's battered and bruised and filthy with his own blood, and he's staring up at you, wide-eyed and trembling like a terrified child. You think this fits him much better; now, he fits the perfect picture of the sniveling little rat that he is.

You lean down, yanking the tie out of his mouth and tossing it aside, grimacing in disgust at the sheer amount of spit that goes with it. Immediately, he sputters and coughs, his throat clenching as if he's struggling to breathe.

Good. You've been struggling to breathe for *years.*

Finally, when he manages to keep himself together, his eyes tentatively meet yours. For what might be the first time, Silas utters your name, breathless and terrified.

Your eyes narrow in unfettered fury, the anger rising to a boil in an instant. *God,* you hate his voice. “Keep my name out of your *fucking* mouth, you sniveling piece of shit.” You raise the gun to aim it straight at his face, pulling back the hammer.

He sputters, paling significantly. “W-Wait, love. This isn't– Surely we can come to an agreement? I can–”

You bare your teeth, the rage in your gut bursting through the seams. You plant your foot on his chest and pin him down, looming over him like a wraith out for blood. “You're not in a position to *negotiate,”* you snarl, digging the sharp point of your heel into his diaphragm until he's struggling to breathe. *“You're in a position to beg.”*

Then, you see it. You watch with sick satisfaction as the final dregs of hope drain from his eyes, as the reality sinks in, as the fear begins to swallow him whole.

You watch as he realizes that you were never broken at all.

It tastes like ambrosia, intoxicatingly sweet on your tongue.

“I'm– I'm sorry,” he finally sputters, his lips trembling. “I'm– I only ever wanted to treat you right. I– I thought you were happy, once you–”

You aim the gun at his knee and pull the trigger.

You swear you can hear the crunch of his kneecap as it shatters. You think you should feel horrified by the scream that wrenches out of his throat, by the way his eyes stretch wide in

pain, by the way his whole body begins to writhe, but you can't even conjure a scrap of pity. Oh, the *euphoria* you feel when you spot tears budding in his eyes – it's unparalleled.

"Try again," you grit out, once his wailing finally settles into sobbing. He's practically hyperventilating, but with your heel digging so ruthlessly into his diaphragm, he can't take a full breath; you twist it a little harder just to feel his muscles strain.

He's terrified of you. *Silas* is terrified of *you.* The untouchable, unbeatable Silas Morghani is looking up at his *broken wife* with the most petrified look you've ever seen on a person. You feel alive, flourishing like a plant under the sun, your roots nourished by the blood of the man who's crushed your flowers into dust time and time again.

"I'm sorry," he whimpers, fresh tears spilling from his eyes. "I'm– I wanted you. I wanted you the moment I saw you. I thought– You never told me– I didn't think–"

You cock the hammer again.

If he wasn't pale already, he certainly is now.

You jump when Boothill suddenly speaks up, having almost forgotten he was there. "Worst spot to get shot is in the gut, for what it's worth." When you look up at him, he's taking a sip of the whiskey straight from the bottle as he lounges in front of your vanity, his lips curled deviously. "Stomach's just below the ribs, a bit off to his left. Shoot there, n' the bile will eat him from the inside out. Burns like hellfire."

You blink at him for a moment. Then, you grin like a madwoman. "I could kiss you," you purr, and you're not quite sure if you're joking or not.

Based on the abrupt bashfulness that floods his expression, neither does he.

(Very briefly, you actually think about it. You think about shooting Silas dead without even bothering to look while you kiss another man – one that might actually treat you decently. You wonder if his lips would taste like blood; you wonder how those sharp teeth would feel against your tongue.)

(A moment later, you excise the thought from your brain.)

You return your gaze to Silas, and the terror in his eyes feels like a ray of sunshine on your face. He takes a trembling breath when you finally lift your foot away, taking a step back and aiming at the spot Boothill directed you to.

You really *would* hate to get blood on this dress.

"W–Wait, love– Wait, you don't need to–"

You pull the trigger.

The scream that tears out of his throat is grating, but the transparent agony on his face is worth it. Blood seeps quickly through the pale fabric of his dress shirt as he writhes, his arms straining against his binds as he shudders.

He looks much better in red.

Yet somehow, you aren't satisfied. So, you pull back the hammer again and fire right at the same spot. He clearly isn't prepared for this one, because he practically *howls,* ragged and anguished and animalistic; it might've garnered some pity if he hadn't spent the last few years treating you like a doll whose fate was to be used and discarded.

You watch him dispassionately as he settles into sobs and wails, his face wet with tears that are steadily rehydrating the dried blood from his nose. The stain on his shirt steadily grows larger and larger, unimpeded. You've trapped him in a cycle of endless strangulation; he winces when his muscles flex as he breathes, and the flinch only exacerbates the pain. His voice muffled to a whimper, he begs, *"Mercy, mercy, mercy–"*

You owe him nothing but suffering.

You glance up at Boothill again. "Could I ask a favor of you, darling?"

His smile is simultaneously devious and quite charming. "Anything at all, sugar."

You tilt your head, your gaze darting back down to the pathetic, shivering form at your feet. "Would you be a dear and pull out his teeth while I hold him down?"

You swear Silas stops breathing.

"Well, who am I to deny such a lovely lady?" Boothill drawls, and the menacing twist to his voice is like music to your ears. He stands with a creak of leather and the subtle noise of whirring machinery, his spurs clinking ominously as he steps toward his prey.

"Wait– Hold on," Silas chokes, his eyes darting wildly between you and the cyborg as you descend on him like a duo of hungry lions to a wounded gazelle. "Wait, please! You don't–"

Now, you cock the hammer once more, your eyes narrowing on him as you stare him down like the roach he is.

His mouth shuts with a clatter of teeth. A fresh bead of sweat trails down his forehead.

"No, no. Keep talking," you say lightly, staring at him unblinkingly. "I'd love to see what new low you're digging yourself to."

"I don't– I…" he sputters, his lips trembling. "What can I say? What– What do you want from me?"

You smile in a way that might've seemed pleasant if you didn't have a gun pointed to his head. "You want the truth, *sweetie?"* you spit, kneeling down by his head; you don't miss the way he quivers, subtly leaning away from you. "There's nothing you can say. You've already said everything I needed to hear."

Your smile widens as he gapes at you, the fresh terror lighting up his eyes.

“Now, it's *my turn* to speak.” Slowly, you decock the gun, mimicking the motion that Boothill made back on the ship. “As for what I want?” You set the revolver down with a heavy *thunk,* far out of his reach, although his hands are still bound. “I want you to sit still, and to keep your *fucking* mouth open. You never had trouble doing that before, hmm?”

You lean over him, blocking out the bright lights and casting a menacing shadow. Ruthlessly, you clench your fist in his hair, narrowing your eyes.

“And if you bite me,” you snarl, “I'll pour that shitty vodka on your stomach until you're *begging* me to kill you.”

Without waiting for a response, you grip his jaw in your free hand, wrenching his mouth open with your nails digging ruthlessly into his skin. Right on cue, Boothill crouches down opposite to you, caging him in, and you pointedly ignore the way he starts to squirm – though you're pleased to note that he isn't fighting your hold just yet.

“Consider me your pliers,” Boothill drawls, openly amused by the pathetic sight at his feet. “You point, n’ I'll pull.”

You smile up at him, truly delighted. It's *wonderful* to have a partner in crime for an occasion like this. “So kind of you.”

You lean over, looking down into Silas’s mouth like he isn't writhing like the worm he is. You release his hair and point to one of his upper canine teeth, tapping it with your nail just to watch him flinch, just to feel his breath stutter with terror. “That one first.”

Boothill makes an affirmative noise as you clench your fist in Silas's hair again, wrenching his jaw further open. As the cyborg's hand nears his mouth, you can feel him starting to fight your grip, perhaps instinctually, but it only takes a sharp squeeze from your pointed nails to still him. As Boothill's fingers squeeze around his tooth, his tongue starts to squirm restlessly in his mouth.

“Keep your slimy tongue off a’ me, or I'll *cut it out,”* he snarls, and you swear his eyes flash red.

You don't doubt him for a moment; clearly, neither does Silas, because he goes so still that his breath stalls in his chest, a whimper escaping from his throat.

Without any hesitation, Boothill pinches down on the tooth again, so hard that you can actually hear the bone creak from the stress.

And then he starts to *pull.*

Silas immediately starts to writhe uncontrollably from the pressure, his jaw starting to close in earnest no matter how hard you fight him. Boothill has accounted for this already, clearly, because he stuffs his free thumb back between Silas's molars, wedging his mouth open with no hope of escape. You put your entire weight into pinning him down by his hair, the skin taut with the strain.

Blood springs up at his gum line, stark against the pale white of his bleached teeth. If you thought he screamed when you shot him, this makes it sound like a *whimper.* His whole body fights and squirms, his head bucking and shaking, but Boothill's grip is utterly unshakable. You clench your jaw, your spine tingling with an instinctual sympathy that he doesn't deserve; you can't imagine how badly it must hurt.

Good. You hope it stings like nothing else he's ever felt. You hope he tastes every drop of the suffering that he's delivered to you, day after day after *day.*

Crimson pools rapidly in the back of his throat, the flow only increasing as he chokes on the fluid. He's forced to swallow it, his throat spasming as he gags, tiny droplets of red spattering on his lips, beading against Boothill's metal.

It almost feels like a mercy when the tooth finally comes loose, a nauseating mess of blood pouring out as a thin layer of his gums is torn away. He coughs and sputters, red spilling from the sides of his mouth as he cries, and cries, and cries. Without ceremony, Boothill drops the piece of bone onto the floor.

You're not sure why *this* part is making your gut churn so horribly. Perhaps it's because of how close you are to the action, unconcealed by blood or cloth; perhaps it's the vague familiarity with pain like this; perhaps it's an instinctual kind of empathy.

You ball up the feeling and stuff it back down your throat, swallowing it like a bitter pill.

He would've done the same to you. He would've done *worse.* The only reason he didn't is because you never gave him the excuse of *discipline.*

This is what he's earned.

“The other one, too,” you say flatly, your gaze cold, but not distant.

If you look away now, you'll never be able to look back.

Boothill obeys without a word, his fingers reaching for the tooth’s twin. Immediately, Silas starts to thrash in earnest, fighting your hold with all of his might, but the cyborg pins him effortlessly without even batting an eye. A thin fracture runs up his tooth from the force he's using, but it bleeds just the same.

The second goes mercifully quickly – or perhaps you don't quite process the length of time correctly. You've grown numb to the wailing of the man who ruined your life.

“I suppose that's enough,” you rasp, your grip loosening against his scalp. You never want to touch him again. “I'm sick of his whining.”

The sobbing is so loud that you fear Boothill doesn't hear you, but he nods without fuss, dropping his hold and standing without fanfare – though he does wipe off the blood on his hands onto Silas's clean pant leg before he does. The moment he's free, Silas turns over and coughs a veritable *fountain* of blood onto the tile, his whole body shaking.

He's disgusting. He's *pathetic.*

Your cold fingers seek out Boothill's gun before you rise to your feet, your jaw tight as you stare down at the quivering form beneath you. Vaguely, you register that Boothill has stepped away again, but it's like your vision has tunneled, your focus narrowing to a pinpoint.

For a long moment, you merely watch Silas as he pieces himself back together, feeling slightly lightheaded.

In the back of your mind, you hear the toll of a bell, distant and ominous.

Daybreak is on the horizon. The night has been long and bloody, and plenty of justice has been dealt…

But there's one more monster due to be put down.

When Silas looks up at you, he barely registers as human in your mind. His eyes are bloodshot, his hair disheveled, his chin red with blood.

You're not sure what he sees in your eyes, but he looks up at you like you're the incarnation of death itself, here to collect its dues.

“Let… Please let me go,” he whispers, trembling and childish. “Please. I'll… You'll never see me again. Just let me go, and I'll–”

In a flash, you cock the hammer and fire, inches away from his head. He flinches so hard that his whole body jolts, a gasp of pain wrenching from his mouth from the movement.

He's done *plenty* of talking, and you're sick of hearing his obnoxious fucking voice.

“And *what?* Make someone else your little *pet?* Keep their leash even tighter, so they'll never have the chance to get away?” you snarl, rage bubbling in your gut. “I know you. I know how you think. I know what you want, you disgusting little *pig.”*

Your eyes glint in the light as you level the barrel straight at his head.

“And I know you'll never hurt anyone again.”

You cock the hammer, and the final bullet sits ready in the chamber.

You watch the air stall in his lungs.

You smile.

“Consider this a divorce.”

It's over in a blink. His horrified eyes light up in the flash from the muzzle, and his head jerks back from the force of the final bullet. He falls back against the ground like an abused ragdoll, the life ripped unceremoniously from his body.

The room is utterly silent except for the ringing in your ears.

He's…

He's actually dead.

He'll never hurt you again.

He'll never lay hands on you again.

He'll never call you *pet* or *doll* again.

You're free.

For a long, *long* moment, you stare down at his corpse, watching the blood seep slowly out of his still body.

It barely feels real.

Even though you can see the wound you've left in his head, part of you is almost expecting him to sit back up.

Another part of you is expecting all of this to be an elaborate ruse, and at any moment, you'll be snapped back into that collar and beaten within an inch of your life for your insolence.

Another part of you is convinced this is a dream.

But there's no question about the weight of the gun in your hand, about the soreness of your feet from your heels, about the unimpeded air hitting your neck.

It's…

It's actually over.

There's truly no words to express how completely and utterly relieved you feel.

And yet…

“Was this too cruel of me?” you suddenly murmur, mostly to yourself.

You're not sure what you're expecting, but it's not for Boothill to bark out a laugh. “You serious?” he chuckles, raising his brows as you finally rip your eyes away from the corpse to

meet his gaze. “If anything, I'd say ya went too easy on him. I didn't even have to slap him conscious again.”

You're quiet for a spell, caught up in the riptide of your spiraling thoughts.

It's not that you *regret* killing him, and you don't particularly regret the torture, either. But…

Something about it just makes you feel… *dirty,* in a way – like you've stooped to his level. It almost feels like the weight of his sins stained your hands when you killed him – like a bloodborne curse spread into your veins from the moment you signed his death warrant. The sound of his screaming is still ringing in your ears, and you're nauseated by the dichotomy of disgust and pleasure churning in your gut.

After a long moment of silence, Boothill adds, “If ya ask me? There ain't no point measurin’ morals with a man like him.”

You blink, your gaze focusing back onto him. (His eyes are very pretty.) “What do you mean?”

“I'll wager that he was never concerned with *righteousness.”* He gestures loosely with one hand. “Same with all the rest a’ these IPC shirtbags. They all think they're *above* justice – above fairness, above honor, above morals.”

There's a particular sort of rage in his expression – an anger that's fused into the core of his soul, irreversibly intertwined. You can't bring yourself to look away.

“And I'll bet that he never thought a’ you like anythin' more than a toy,” he continues, clenching his fists. “That's how all these guys think. To them, everyone's an object – an *asset,”* he spits, and the venom in his voice is contagious. “They look at you, n’ they see a price tag.”

There's an odd distance in his gaze, like he's lost in the fire burning within him. Then, he seems to come back to you, and his eyes soften slightly, his fists relaxing.

“So ask yourself this: why should you treat a man with honor if he never did anything honorable in his life?”

And in an instant, the vague sense of guilt evaporates like smoke.

He's right.

Silas has *never* had morals – never had a code that considered anything beyond his own desires. Every single day, he signed documents condemning millions to death or slavery or poverty, sealing their fates with little more than the flick of a pen. He ripped off your wings and stuffed you in a cage, always with one finger on the trigger, waiting for you to slip up.

He would've killed you without batting an eye – like he was throwing away a broken doll that had long fulfilled its purpose. And when he killed countless people from his desk, he *never* thought of them as people.

They were only *assets.*

(Just trimming the fat.)

Now, as your eyes drift over to the corpse, you understand one thing more intimately than ever before–

Beasts have no capacity for morality. Naturally, those without morals should be treated like beasts.

You were doing the galaxy a favor, really, ridding it of such a blight.

Suddenly, Boothill grimaces, turning his eyes toward the door of the dressing room. “Hate to say it, but we're outta time.”

You nod slowly, and you turn away from the corpse of your jailer for the last time.

This chapter of your life is over – and with it, you will wash your hands clean.

“I'm ready.”

He makes an affirmative noise and stands, throwing down the half-empty bottle of whiskey without a care in the world. As he grows nearer to you, you turn his revolver in your hand, offering it back to him just as he did to you. He gives you a charming little grin as he holsters it with a flourish.

“Now, let's make tracks, yeah?” he says lightly, and a beat later, he rips the door open, completely shattering the lock in the process.

You smile, your heart swelling with some emotion that you've forgotten the name of.

(Oh, well. You have plenty of time to relearn them all.)

He leads you out into the main area of the lounge, and it truly looks like a horror movie was filmed here. Corpses litter the floor indiscriminately, and the air reeks of blood; never before have you thought of such a smell as *pleasant* – until now, that is. Through the shattered window, you can hear the howl of wind and the noise of what must be at least a few helicopters circling the building. The space is lit ominously by the wandering search lights, sparkling against the blood and shattered glass on the carpet.

Briefly, you wonder how exactly Boothill is planning on escaping; you have no doubt that the IPC is swarming the building like ants to sugar, so the ground certainly isn't an option. The roof, maybe? Although, that would still be quite risky; there's almost certainly going to be snipers on the lookout for him.

When you grow near the edge of the stage, Boothill speaks up. “Ah, ya might wanna take a step back,” he warns nonchalantly.

You throw him a curious look, and you damn near jump out of your skin when a cacophonous *crash* shakes the building, glass shattering loudly in your ears. You whip around, only to find

that part of a ship has smashed in through the already broken window, using the breacher bridge as both a battering ram and a boarding ramp.

What a fucking *lunatic.* You can't get enough of it.

“That's one way to make an entrance, I guess,” you laugh.

He shrugs, grinning widely. “What can I say? I like puttin’ on a show. N’ what's the point of havin’ autopilot on a ship if ya don't use it?” Shielded from the helicopters lurking outside, he strolls onto the ramp, turning back to you and making a grand, sweeping gesture toward the inside. “Climb aboard, chickadee,” he chimes, light and charming. “We've got one more chore for the night.”

For a moment, you look into his eyes, examining the red pinpricks of his pupils.

This is a night of celebration – and it's time to bid your dire mood goodbye.

You make a grand show of curtsying before moving inside, snickering quietly as the two of you board. Once you're on, the bridge slowly retracts, although the hatch doesn't close. You stand at the edge with Boothill at your side, and although you waver slightly when the ship begins to move away from the building, he holds one arm in front of you to prevent you from falling. (He's rather sweet, isn't he?)

As the ship pulls away with the clatter of shifting glass, the wind begins to bite into your skin, but you can't even say you mind.

It feels like home. It feels like *freedom.*

The ship halts some distance away, and the way you're positioned adjacent to the building means you're still shielded from the roaming helicopters; going by the reflections in the glass, your ship is the focus of all of their spotlights. You watch as Boothill pulls a dark red bullet from his mouth *(since when can he do that?)* and flick it into the air. With a flourish, he swings his gun and snaps it cleanly into the cylinder, perfectly accounting for the billowing wind – all of this without even batting an eye.

You're still staring at him with open awe when he turns to you, holding out his revolver grip-first, a wild, wicked grin stretching across his face.

“Would ya like to do the honors?” he says, raising his voice to be heard over the howl of the wind.

Your smile is a slow, creeping thing. What a gentleman. “It'd be my *pleasure.”*

The grip feels oddly familiar in your hand, like an old companion you haven't seen in years, even though you'd never even held a gun before today. You admire it again for only a moment, tracing the details with your eyes, following the way it shines. It's truly beautiful for a tool of death and destruction.

Then, you cock the hammer and aim at the hole in the window leading to the lounge–

And you fire.

The bright flash of the explosion stings your eyes, but you don't even blink, not even as the deafening *boom* rocks the ship in the air, the heat warming your skin like a blazing fire.

And then the building *really* starts to blow.

Floor by floor, explosives go off in a chain reaction of brilliant light and fire and debris, the sound so loud that it makes your ears ring. It's a truly spectacular sight, and you can finally identify that mysterious, lingering emotion.

Pure, unfiltered elation.

You lean carefully toward the edge to watch the explosions go further down, level by level, slightly disturbed by how much you're trusting him not to let you fall. The crash of the building crumbling is truly deafening, and the heat is nearly blistering, but it's all worth it to watch the beams fold under their own weight. In barely any time at all, the IPC headquarters is little more than a mountain of burning rubble spilling into the streets – and with it, all remnants of your prison.

Tragically, you are allowed only a moment to marvel before the hatch slides closed, instantly silencing the howl of the wind.

“Best get a move-on, before they get any bright ideas involvin’ *missiles,”* Boothill says lightly.

You blink up at him in open alarm, caught in the middle of offering his gun back to him. *“What?”*

He laughs without a care in the world as he plucks the weapon from your hands, holstering it with a flourish. “Just pullin’ your leg. The shirtbags want me alive, anyway, so it's not like–”

With flawless timing, the ship rocks hard in the air, the unmistakable patter of bullets hitting the metal hull.

“Son of a forkin’ bench!” he spits, whipping around and bolting for the cockpit.

Despite the very real threat to your life, you can't help but burst into laughter as you scramble after him, stumbling against the wall as the thrusters activate, your heels buckling beneath you. You manage to collapse into the copilot's chair a moment before he activates the boosters, the force leaving you clutching onto the arm rests for dear life.

While Boothill is doubtlessly a *reckless* flier, he's undeniably efficient; the chase barely lasts for a minute before he manages to escape orbit, the hull rumbling with the buildup to FTL travel. Your stomach lurches into your throat when the ship bursts into hyperdrive, and by the time the ride evens out, you're completely breathless with laughter.

You wipe tears from your eyes as you look over, only to find that he's already staring at you with an emotion you can't quite name.

“You went n’ lost your mind?” he chuckles, even though he's grinning just as widely as you.

You take your first full breath in some time, slumping down in your seat. “Only because you lost yours. Who the *fuck* gave you your license?”

The two of you burst into laughter all at once, and for a moment, you're utterly captivated by the absurdity of it all – laughing yourself to tears with the man that helped you kill your…

Well, he was hardly ever your husband, was he?

“How did you even get up to the roof, by the way?” you ask, once you've caught your breath again. “I noticed that you swung *down* into the lounge.”

He grins at you, wild and manic. “I climbed.”

You quite frankly *cannot* stop your jaw from dropping. *“Climbed?* From the *ground floor?”*

“Nah. Too much work,” he says, somehow smiling even wider. “I jumped from the next buildin’ over. *Then* I climbed.”

Holy shit. He’s *crazy* crazy.

“You can't be serious. There are – or, well.” You blink for a moment, then rephrase, “There *were* over a hundred stories.”

When he shrugs carelessly, all you can do is laugh, shaking your head in fond exasperation.

Then, you turn your gaze to the world outside of the windshield, to the stars streaking by in bright lines of light. You've always found hyperspace to be unbelievably gorgeous – a kaleidoscope of blurring colors, too fast for your eyes to follow. It's been so long since you were able to leave the planet that you'd nearly forgotten the scope of its beauty.

(You'll have plenty of time to look at it now, won't you?)

“Where are you headed next?” you ask, a bit quiet, a bit thoughtful.

“Was just about to ask you the same thing.” His chair creaks as he turns to face you, but you can't bring yourself to look away from the world outside of the ship just yet. “I'm happy to drop ya off wherever you'd like, y'know. No skin off my nose.”

(Momentarily, you're startled by his generosity – both by how earnestly he spoke and how easily he offered. Then again, you suppose he's been quite generous all this time.)

Truthfully, though, you haven't even thought about your destination.

This moment – standing on the precipice of a new chapter of your life, with a near-infinite number of paths before you… It almost felt dangerous to think about this in advance. But now you're here, and all of the universe is laid out in front of you.

Now, you have as many options as your mind can ponder.

After a long moment, you reply, “I think I'll see where the wind takes me.” Then, you tear your eyes away from the stars, meeting his gaze with a tiny smile. “But I'm open to travel recommendations, if you have any.”

He raises a brow, grinning playfully. “You sure that *I'm* the kinda man you wanna ask for travel advice, chickadee?”

“I can't think of anyone I'd rather ask.” Your smile widens into something eager, something thrilled. “I'll be getting a gun, if that helps increase your options.”

He laughs, bright and warm, and a hot spark of delight flares up in your chest. (He's very pretty when he laughs.)

“Well, I'm sure I can think of somethin’,” he drawls, leaning back in his seat. Then, a look of excitement crosses his face – the contagious sort, so infectious that you can't help but lean closer. “You ever been to the Frigherix system?”

You tilt your head. “Can't say I have.”

The grin on his face damn near quadruples. “Oh, if I'm goin' off that whiskey you had back there, you'll *love* the stuff they've got. Finest fudgin' malt juice this side of the cosmos, if ya ask me – like molten gold n’ honey lit on *fire.”* He chuckles, readjusting his hat. “Kicks like a forkin’ *mule,* that stuff.”

(He's…. quite charming like this, isn't he?)

Before you can say a word, he perks up again. “Oh! N’ after that, you've gotta get a taste of the stuff in Aloniir! Got a buddy from out there, n’ *nobody* does it like them. Craziest muddle-fudgers I ever done met. I told ‘em I couldn't get drunk anymore, n’ they acted like I dared ‘em!” He speaks faster and faster as he gets more invested, gesturing emphatically with so much passion that it lights up his whole face. “They've got this drink – uh… Vantoor’s Kiss, I think. It's a two-parter, y’see, ‘cause they put poison *and* venom in the first glass, n’ the antidote in the second! Burns like nothin’ else, but the *taste* is–”

You settle into your seat as you listen – well, more like *half-listen,* at this point.

It's hardly your fault that he's so handsome. Really, you'd be *crazy* to be able to pay attention to anything else.

As for your destination, well… You'll figure that out sooner or later.

You have plenty of time to choose, after all.

End Notes

Further details on some of the warnings here (they are quite spoilery so make sure you don't mind that!)

Noncon: the reader is essentially forced into a marriage that she doesn't want by an extremely powerful man, although he doesn't directly threaten her into it. There are extremely vague mentions of him having sex with her (no details), which she doesn't want, but she is in no position to refuse or resist. She also initiates sex (again, vaguely) sometimes as a distraction tactic, not because she's really into it.

Nonconsentual body modification: reader has an unknown surgery performed on her. No removal of limbs or anything crazy like that – she actually doesn't learn what it is until the next chapter.

Physical abuse: the reader is shocked by a shock collar exactly one time.

Violence and gore: the main villain gets his comeuppance in the form of a shock collar being used on him once, several gunshot wounds (knee and stomach), having two of his teeth ripped out, and being shot dead. This scene can be fairly easily skipped or skimmed (in my opinion). Gore is definitively over at the underlined "You're free."

aaaaaand that's a wrap for this chapter.

to those that stuck around, thank you very much for reading!! future chapters will be more about the aftermath and reader's relationship to boothill! no more gore or violence; i debated excising it here but the ending honestly lacked the sort of punch that i wanted without it. also i just knowwwwww boothill would enable the FUCK out of this behavior which felt too interesting to pass up. depending on how i break things up, there will either be three or four chapters total. yes, it will be a happy ending! there will be smut in a future chapter as well. my apologies to the anon that requested this because you got way more than you bargained for lmao.

also there's one (1) extremely obscure game grumps reference in this and if you can find it you win a lifetime supply of boothill kisses. yes the title is that lyric from that stupid fucking godsmack song. i saw the opportunity and i just couldnt help myself.

more stuff over at my tumblr @ averycutesalamander ! i have plenty of little stuff over there that i don't upload here so feel free to take a peek if you want more crumbs

i hope you all enjoyed !! and i hope to see you in the next one :) thank you lovelies 💖💖💖💖

EDIT: PLEASE FEAST YOUR EYES ON THIS FANTASTIC GORGEOUS IMMACULATE FANART FROM PINKGVTS !!!!!!! I LOVE YOU FOREVER AND

EVER THANK YOU SO MUCH 💝💝💝💝💝
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